

Chairman Tom Davis
Opening Statement
“The National Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan:
Is the U.S. Ready for Avian Flu?”
November 4, 2005

Good morning. Today, we are honored to have Secretary Michael O. Leavitt here to discuss what health experts describe as the largest public health threat facing our nation: the threat of pandemic flu.

We do not know when, or where, the next pandemic will strike. We do not know what strain of influenza will be the culprit – although much evidence points to avian flu. The virulent H5N1 strain has already caused 62 deaths in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Nor do we know if avian flu will turn out to be more like the swine flu – a pandemic that never materialized.

Regardless, we need to improve our readiness – because we can be sure that the next flu pandemic is a matter of when, not if. And when that time does come, the stakes will be enormous. The Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918-19, for example, caused an estimated 40-50 million deaths worldwide. Experts have projected that more than half a million Americans could die, and over two million could be hospitalized in the event of a U.S. pandemic flu outbreak.

How quickly could an influenza pandemic spread across the globe? As fast as you could fly from Hanoi to Washington, D.C. We live in a Flat World – a world connected not only by email carried over fiber optic cables, but by commerce and cargo transported by jumbo jets. Pandemic flu can move just as fast.

As federal officials, it is our responsibility to make sure America is prepared – prepared to detect the strain of pandemic flu, prepared to communicate with our state and local partners, and prepared to work with industry to get vaccine production moving as quickly as possible.

Earlier this week, President Bush outlined the Administration’s National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza. The three pillars of this strategy are preparedness and communication, surveillance and detection, and response and containment. The strategy allows the government to take immediate steps to ensure early warning against the possibility of a flu pandemic.

The President has requested more than \$7 billion in emergency funding to begin immediately implementing the National Strategy. This includes: nearly \$3 billion to accelerate the development of cell culture technology, to move vaccine production away from the lengthy and fragile process that depends on cultivating the vaccine in chicken eggs; \$1.5 billion to stockpile the H5N1 vaccine currently in clinical trials at NIH; and \$1

billion to stockpile anti-viral drugs to treat first responders and our most vulnerable populations.

Additionally, the strategy requests \$580 million for pandemic preparedness and about \$100 million to help states complete and exercise their pandemic plans. The strategy also calls for improving our detection capabilities, training personnel, and additional planning at both the federal and local levels.

While finalizing of the HHS Pandemic Influenza Plan was important and necessary to provide more detailed guidance to state and local health officials, many concerns about preparedness still remain. I have already heard concerns from the Department of Health, in my home state of Virginia, about the limited amount of money for stockpiling the federally recommended amounts of antiviral treatments and the need for additional support across the board for emergency preparedness.

I think all of us here today agree that our state and local health officials will be on the front lines of a pandemic response. It's our job to provide them with the adequate support and essential resources they need to effectively prepare for and respond to a pandemic.

Today's Washington Post applauds the Administration for, quote, "taking preparedness seriously." But the editorial also says "the plan seems divorced from reality" and "is too vague to be reassuring." This morning we'll search for reality-based details in the hope of reassuring all Americans that we are on the road to preparedness.

I look forward to a constructive dialogue with Secretary Leavitt on this life-and-death issue. I think the National Strategy and HHS Pandemic Influenza Plan will offer appropriate guidance and help better prepare our country for the unknowns of pandemic flu. However, as the Secretary has mentioned before, we need to remember that the Plan is a living and breathing document subject to improvement as we develop better strategies and practices.